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Competition with Iran in a Constrained Resource Environment

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NPS NRP Executive Summary

Deterring Iran: Strategic Behavior and the Maritime Domain
Period of Performance: 10/22/2021 – 10/21/2022
Report Date: 09/29/2022 | Project Number: NPS-22-N155-A
Naval Postgraduate School, National Security Affairs (NSA)



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM

NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

Deterring Iran: Strategic Behavior and the Maritime Domain

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Principal Investigator (PI): Dr. Afshon Ostovar, National Security Affairs

Additional Researcher(s): No additional researchers participated in this research project.

Student Participation: No students participated in this research project.

Prepared for:

Topic Sponsor Lead Organization: N3/N5 - Plans & Strategy

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Project Summary

The turn toward great power competition (GPC) will require tough choices regarding the U.S. Navy's investments and global force posture. That includes in the Middle East, where the threat posed by Iran remains persistent. Deterring Iran's malign behavior has been difficult. This report examines why, and focuses on what motivates Iran's grand strategy and the capabilities it relies on to advance that strategy and challenge its adversaries. It further explores the recent trajectory of Iran's malign behavior in the greater Persian Gulf region, particularly in the maritime domain, to understand how that behavior is designed to further political and strategic aims. Understanding the drivers of Iran's behavior, and its appetite for risk taking, is important, and factors that should be considered when thinking through any potential shifts to U.S. maritime strategy. The report concludes with some brief concluding recommendations on how the Iranian challenge might be managed by designing assistance to better counter Iran's chief strategic capabilities—missiles and drones. In order to address the challenges posed by those means, force posture and partner capacity building efforts in the region should be deliberately designed to counter and defeat them.

Keywords: *Great Power Competition (GPC), Middle East, strategy, deterrence, United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Persian Gulf, Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, ballistic missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), drones, grey zone conflict*

Background

This study was borne out of a critical question: how to do more with less. It is aimed to help inform the Navy's strategic and planning considerations regarding how best to deploy the fleet in an era of great power competition. To that end, the study looks at the Middle East, a region that continues to pose threats to U.S. interests and military operations, primary among them: Iran.

Deterring Iran has hinged on the notion that a continuous American maritime presence would prevent Iranian aggression at sea and more broadly. This effort has been mostly successful. There is no doubt that the U.S. Navy presents an insurmountable challenge to Iran, and one that Iran's leadership must consider in operational planning and strategic decision-making. However, it is also clear that, while Iran's behavior might be constrained, it has nonetheless pursued an aggressive line toward U.S. forces, and toward its neighboring adversaries. The net effect is an Iran deterred in part but not in whole.

In order to better discourage Iran's malign behavior, we must first have a better understanding of Iran's behavior. This report pursues the latter aim by examining Iran's grand strategy, the capabilities it relies on to advance that strategy, and the recent trajectory of its aggressive behavior in the greater Persian Gulf region. Understanding the drivers of Iran's behavior, its appetite for risk taking, and the capabilities that enable it to effectively challenge regional partners, is important, and are factors that should be considered in the Navy's strategy and future planning efforts concerning the Middle East.

The purpose of this study is to build on our knowledge of the Iranian threat by examining its recent cases of aggressive behavior, especially in the maritime domain. To that end it builds on previous work by the author, and two articles in particular: "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War." *Security Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2019; and, "Iran, its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion," *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, no. 6, 2018: 1237-1255.



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The research for this study was focused on unclassified literature and news reporting, including Persian language sources such as official statements; published interviews with military leadership; government publications; military publications; and semi-official news sources. The information gleaned from those sources was used to establish baselines for Iranian strategy and behavior, and the effectiveness and limits of current deterrence efforts. Short case studies were developed to analyze Iranian attacks in the region. These case studies helped determine the tactics Iran relies on, the vulnerabilities those tactics pose to U.S. and partner interests, and the capabilities required to deter, counter, or prevent such attacks from succeeding. By establishing the threat posed by Iran, the capabilities and tactics used by Iran, and the trend lines of Iran-related malign incidents, we were able to identify what capabilities are most needed to counteract and deter Iran and which capabilities are less necessary.

Findings and Conclusions

This study finds that Iran relies on two main areas to exert pressure against U.S. forces and partner states: missiles and drones. Those capabilities have been used by Iran and its proxies with strategic effect against U.S. forces in the region, and against partner states in the region. In order to dissuade Iran from using these capabilities toward coercive ends, partner states must possess the means to counter these capabilities directly. The U.S. Navy is in the best position to help partner states redesign their defensive efforts, to include spending and force development, to that end.

This study and its core findings will aid in Naval Operations for Operations, Plans and Strategy's (N3/N5) near-, mid-, and long-term planning processes and strategy concerning the problem set posed by Iran. It will further inform N3/N5's planning efforts regarding force posture and operations in the Middle East, and by extension, sharpen thinking on the regional implications of plans and strategy regarding great power competition.

Drawing from the study's findings, N3/N5 planners and strategists should consider directly linking the U.S. Navy's force posture and partner capacity building efforts in the broader Persian Gulf region with countering Iran's specific capabilities of concern, especially missiles and drones. Curbing Iran's ability to use those capabilities, by facilitating an effort to develop a sustainable architecture to counter them in the region, will better constrain Iran's behavior and better limit the effectiveness of its aggression.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has identified the problem that Iran's chief strategic capabilities—missiles and drones—pose to U.S. forces in the Middle East and regional partner states. In order to address the challenges posed by those means, force posture and partner capacity building efforts in the region should be deliberately designed to counter and defeat them. Further research should therefore examine the potential weapons systems, force mixes, and fleet deployments required in the region to develop a sustainable architecture to nullify Iran's current capability advantage.

References

Ostovar, A. (2018). "Iran, its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion," *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 6, no. 1.



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Acronyms

GPC Great Power Competition
N3/N5 Naval Operations for Operations, Plans and Strategy
NRP Naval Research Program

